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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: October 20, 1958

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SUBJECT: De Gaulle Letter

PARTICIPANTS: The Secretary
General Gruenther
Mr. McCloy
Mr. Elbrick
Mr. Smith
Mr. Farley

Mr. Timmons
Mr. McBride

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The Secretary said that General de Gaulle had sent a letter to the President on September 25, which he thereupon read. He said knowledge of this letter had leaked to the Germans, Italians and Spaak, at least in a diluted form. They had all rebelled against the French idea of a tripartite world directorate. Macmillan had discussed it with Adenauer, and the Germans had strongly resisted this idea. The Italians had been nearly hysterical. The Chancellor felt that de Gaulle had not been frank with him. The Secretary added that de Gaulle had raised this general concept with him on July 5 and had indicated he would follow this up with an expansion of the thoughts he had expressed at that time. The net result of this memorandum, however, had been to destroy the confidence of the Chancellor and to incur the antagonism of Spaak. De Gaulle had been pushing for the acceptance of his ideas and we might have some preliminary tripartite talks here, with Caccia and Alphand talking to Governor Herter or to Mr. Murphy. There was some truth in de Gaulle's concept that the present regional approach to NATO and to other similar organizations was insufficient. We had long recognized this and the Secretary himself in 1949 had pointed out that the creation of NATO would leave other areas uncovered, partially as a result of this, he believed war had come in Asia shortly thereafter. The Secretary added that at the NATO Heads of Government meeting we had proposed regional pacts should have a closer liaison among themselves. We have also been developing NATO consultation on general threats to peace. But the present set-up he recognized was not entirely adequate.

The Secretary referred to Spaak's Boston speech which was given after Spaak became aware of the de Gaulle letter. He thought this was a good speech and was directed to some of de Gaulle's proposals. The Secretary added that the problem was how to disengage the elements which were worth pursuing from those which could not be implemented such as the concept of the tripartite world directorate,

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which we must get rid of. He agreed there was a need for some more effective way of organizing the free world. The North Atlantic Council, for example, under current conditions was not useful in coping with problems in Asia. However, de Gaulle's thought of reimposing world hegemony by the three countries was out of the question. The Secretary said we were now engaged in facing up to the situation brought to a head by de Gaulle and that we were in a period of some crisis. He noted the December meeting of NATO would discuss this matter. He said he thought tripartite talks here were probably necessary although this would cause a serious problem with the Germans and Italians.

Mr. McCloy said that the de Gaulle letter had been a divisive element and represented a play by de Gaulle for power. He thought the attempt to reimpose France over the other continental countries was extremely dangerous. The Secretary said that he agreed. The Secretary noted there had been an evolution in NATO in the past two years and that Spaak had paid a deserved tribute to us for the development of political consultation in NATO. He said the North Atlantic Council was quite a different body now than in the past. However, he questioned whether this evolution would satisfy de Gaulle if it does not have as its primary result the building up of France.

General Gruenther said that undoubtedly there was difficulty in France in keeping de Gaulle in line, and he thought that there were few who have real influence with him. He noted de Gaulle wished General Speidel removed from his NATO command. General Gruenther said the French had asked him for his views on these matters recently in France and that he believed the de Gaulle memorandum was a symbol of French desire to obtain a greater share of control in world affairs. The Secretary noted that de Gaulle wrote the letter himself and had not consulted others. He had wished to keep it secret but had given a copy to Spaak and later had briefed the Germans and Italians. Since this had leaked, the fact that tripartite talks were held here would probably leak also. Mr. McCloy indicated that he thought the language of the de Gaulle memorandum was extremely presumptuous. The Secretary said that the de Gaulle idea of amending NATO by extending its area was fantastic. To extend NATO to Africa, Asia or the Near East would require the consent of the countries involved. He said there was a dual problem in extending the NATO area because the northern members of NATO were already concerned over NATO activities in the Middle East. Therefore it would not be acceptable to these countries to extend the area as the French desired, even if this were acceptable to the other countries outside of NATO who are involved.

The Secretary said the de Gaulle memorandum was in fact full of old ideas. He said that the idea of a single free world collective security organization had proved not to be feasible. He referred to the fact that the December Heads of Government meeting of NATO had accepted liaison among the free world pacts. The Organization of American States had later not concurred in this development of closer liaison. The US is the connecting link in this organization and we should keep others informed about the activities of the various regional collective security organizations.

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Mr. McCloy said that some of the de Gaulle arguments regarding NATO were true but that the concept of the tripartite world directorate was simply a play for French prestige and a promotional scheme for France. He said France made a very small contribution to NATO and in fact was contributing less and less since her forces were tied down in Algeria. General Gruenther added that General Norstad felt tripartite political direction would be extremely bad for NATO. The Secretary said he thought even knowledge that France had suggested this was bad. Mr. McCloy raised the question of the reply to the de Gaulle letter and the Secretary said that a reply was being sent October 21 and that the British were following the same line as ourselves in attempting to play down the French proposal. General Gruenther said that de Gaulle would certainly make a major effort but that he would find tough opposition to his ideas everywhere. He thought that the letter as it had been delivered to us was much toned down from the original draft.

The Secretary said that the Foreign Office was unhappy about this letter and realized the problems it created with others. He noted that the French had been very aloof on NATO matters since de Gaulle's accession to power. The Secretary added that we must dispose of the idea of rewriting the NATO Treaty and probably make some effort at tripartite talks which had been in abeyance since Suez. The Suez crisis was not the only thing which had caused us to give up tripartite talks at this time, but also German and Italian insistence on a broader framework for free world talks had played a part. If talks were held here with Caccia and Alphand together, they would be the first tripartite talks in two years at this level. There are of course certain special tripartite responsibilities on questions such as Germany but the French wish to extend these to many other areas as well. The Italians are hostile to tripartite talks even on the subject of Germany. Adenauer is somewhat less sensitive than the Italians.

The Secretary said that we had originally thought we could take our time in coping with the de Gaulle problem but that Macmillan, after talking with the Chancellor, felt that we should meet the problem sooner. Therefore he urged that we go ahead and have tripartite talks in which we would attempt to dispose of the French ideas. The Secretary thought that this might now be necessary.

Mr. McCloy suggested that we reply without proposing tripartite talks but simply pointing out the difficulties of the French approach. General Gruenther said that the French idea of introducing the Standing Group into the talks was not a good one, and that de Gaulle probably did not realize that the Standing Group had changed radically in nature and that the chairman of the Military Committee in Permanent Session (presently a Dutchman) now participated in Standing Group meetings. Therefore he thought this was a naive suggestion. The Secretary thought that the Germans would accept tripartite talks in order to get rid of the de Gaulle memorandum.

General Gruenther thought it would be preferable to meet with the French alone and exchange views with them. This would satisfy Macmillan's desire for action, smoke the French out and at the same time prevent the problem with the Italians.

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Mr. McCloy reiterated his view that it would be preferable simply to meet with the French and point out the difficulties to them. The Secretary agreed that he felt some concern at tripartite meetings and that this would place us on the slippery slope. He noted the Canadians also opposed tripartite talks. If we accepted such talks we would already have moved quite a way in de Gaulle's direction. The British were rather pushing in this direction but he had some doubts. Mr. McCloy repeated his suggestion of simply going back to the French and indicating the doubts which we had on the substance of their views.

The Secretary pointed out that the British were negative on the substance of the memorandum but advocated tripartite talks. They wished to handle the de Gaulle memorandum carefully, and we also were concerned because of the rather delicate relationship which we had with him. We should attempt to give him some degree of satisfaction and the Secretary had thought of preliminary tripartite talks as a step in this direction. However, obviously they can be stopped though the British would not be persuaded easily to give up tripartite talks.

The Secretary concluded that the three could discuss some of the problems raised by de Gaulle for a considerable period of time. Alternately, there could be bilateral talks. He thought he would talk to the British again and perhaps not send a letter from the President at this time but simply ask Alphand to call and discuss these matters with him. Alternatively, the letter from the President could be sent without mentioning tripartite talks. The Secretary concluded that he would consider the matter more fully.

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